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“A worn, weary, discontented look”: The Influence of West Point
and the Hudson River Valley on Poe

Gina Claywell

The scholarship devoted to the impact of Edgar Allan Poe’s military career on his literary work is slim, especially compared to the overall body of work devoted to Poe. What does exist focuses primarily on the effect that military service in general had on his topics and themes, with some emphasis placed on his West Point stint. One only has to visit the United States Military Academy at West Point to know that living there would leave an indelible mark on a cadet’s psyche, yet the scarcity of criticism devoted to this topic suggests that scholars feel that Poe’s time as an artillerist and then cadet was only a minor blip in his biography. Furthermore, although Poe’s settings are frequently ambiguous, West Point’s dramatic setting high above the Hudson River must have influenced the tone, cadence, and imagery of his writings, and his experience both there and in the Army imbued his early works with a martial air. The impact of West Point is subtle at times, visible most to those who are intimate with the place and its effect on cadets.¹ While the West Point effect can be traced in many of Poe’s works, this essay focuses primarily on the text that Poe published immediately after leaving West Point and that he dedicated to the Corps of Cadets—his 1831 *Poems*.

Before attending the Academy, Poe had served the Army commendably as Regimental Sergeant Major Edgar A. Perry, according to former West Point Librarian, Egon Weiss.² According to William F. Hecker, Poe was “the most technically competent artillerist in his battery” which doubled his pay and ensured him “a daily ration of whiskey or rum” but eventually led to “personal isolation.”³ Poe was “the army’s expert bomb artisan,” and just as

Poe “carefully constructed elements of gunpowder and iron to explosively carry military targets into death, Poe the poet strove for similar effects with his verse and prose. Thus, Poe’s desire that his poems act as aesthetic ‘bombs’ figures him both as a poet-artillerist and artillerist-poet.”⁴ Hecker, a 1991 West Point graduate, notes that “The attention to detail, the appreciation for minute nuances of sound, and the modulation of rhythm that Poe built into his verse to achieve his aesthetic of beauty were reinforced by the artistic craftsmanship required to build a functional artillery bomb.”⁵

After an ongoing struggle between John Allan and Poe, he finally received an appointment to West Point in March 1830 (O 1:55). On June 28, 1830, Poe wrote to Allan acknowledging his letter written on May 21: “I received it 3 days ago—it has been lying some time in the W. P. post office” (O 1:55). Poe seems, in his response, to exult in the poor performance of cadets, but he does admit, “the Regulations are rigid in the extreme” (O 1:56). By November, Poe seems to be doing well. On November 6, 1830, he writes to Allan, “I have a very excellent standing in my class—in the first section in every thing and have great hopes of doing well. I have spent my time very pleasantly hitherto—but the study requisite is incessant, and the discipline exceedingly rigid” (O 1:57). He then asks his foster father to send math instruments and a math text or to forward money to the West Point Superintendent so that Poe could purchase the needed items. Poe regularly asked Allan for money before attending, while there, and after leaving West Point, very much as he had done while at the University of Virginia.

Just as contemporary cadets do, Poe faced not only insufficient funds despite being salaried but also homesickness and some difficulty balancing academics with social involvement. Steeped in tradition, the West Point culture has changed little since Poe’s time, as Librarian

Christopher Barth points out in *West Point*, where he discusses 19th-century cadet letters shown each year to newly arriving cadets: “Talking about drills, uniforms and other cadet concerns, these letters demonstrate that today’s cadets are likely to face the same issues that cadets were experiencing some 100 years ago.”⁶ Modern cadets’ daily activities are similar to Poe’s: “Foot drill, guard mounts, and small-arms marksmanship rounded out the list of activities that enlisted soldiers of Poe’s time faced daily.”⁷ Arthur Hobson Quinn reveals Poe’s daily routine: “Cadet Edgar Poe began at sunrise with his classes, breakfasted at seven, attended classes again from eight until one, and from two to four. For variety, there were military exercises until sunset, and after supper classes again until half past nine.”⁸ Today’s West Pointers face a similar schedule including frequent military exercises, except their day includes intramural sports.

Karl E. Oelke reveals the annual West Point traditions that frequently saw cadets “doing all kinds of mischief.”⁹ Like other cadets, Poe enjoyed a good prank. One of his roommates, Thomas W. Gibson, reported in 1867 that the two of them had played a horrific, grisly joke on their roommate and another cadet involving a headless gander, darkness, and the pretense that Gibson had killed a professor; the joke left the roommate nearly catatonic.¹⁰ David L. Carson connects this incident directly to Poe’s “*Duc De L’Omelette*”: “the plot of the Duc begins to assume meaningful form when it is viewed in relation to certain aspects of Poe’s abortive career at the United States Military Academy,” noting that the incident as told by Gibson inspired Poe’s story.¹¹ Poe had been known for such pranks for years, according to James A. Harrison, for, as Colonel T. H. Ellis had reported, young Poe once interrupted a game of the Gentleman’s Whist Club at the Ellis home by dressing in a sheet and acting the part of a cane-wielding ghost.¹²

Poe’s playing a prank at West Point undercuts the view that military life and creativity are not compatible. Indeed, as Daniel Hoffman indicates, “compulsory discipline” is not

“opposed to the originality of [Poe’s] Gothic imagination; instead, West Point’s rigors might very well have led to his increased creativity.”¹³ Oelke maintains “in spite of the spartan regimen, Poe had both time and opportunity for intellectual pursuits other than curriculum-related studies while he was at West Point.”¹⁴ Oelke further points to the literary and dialectic societies and lyceum that were popular at West Point while Poe was there as opportunities not only for his social participation but also for his literary works.¹⁵ G. R. Thompson in “Edgar A. Poe: An American Life (1909-1849),” writes that Poe “soon became popular among cadets for his comic verses satirizing the officers.”¹⁶ Hecker claims Poe wrote enough caricatures to fill an entire book.¹⁷ The shared cadet experiences help explain, as Hoffman references, why Poe would twice ask his former classmates for subscriptions (as Hoffman notes¹⁸); even among cadets who do not graduate, like Poe, the place can nonetheless result in lifelong friendships.

Despite Poe’s popularity at West Point, critics have suggested that Poe may have felt out of place among other cadets whose upbringings had groomed them for an officer’s position. Thompson says Poe was “Embarrassed among the class of more or less aristocratic officer candidates.”¹⁹ Poe was annoyed that cadets thought he looked old, according to Harrison, and the rumor “that he had procured a cadet’s appointment for his son, and the boy having died, the father had substituted himself in his place.”²⁰ Poe, then, was slightly older and poorer than some of the other cadets, a fact that served as an irritant to him. Ian Walker argues in “The Poe Legend” that “Almost every aspect of Poe’s life was altered or fabricated in order to mask his real origins and circumstances.”²¹ Poe’s January 3, 1831, letter to Allan admits, “You sent me to W. Point like a beggar,” and the economic difficulties Poe had experienced at the University of Virginia were repeated at West Point; he concludes, “I must resign” (O 1:61). Weiss states that Poe’s “emotional instability, coupled with deep personal problems, such as his constant need for

funds and a lack of time to devote to poetry, more than his deficiency in military aptitude, cut short his cadetship.”²² Another possible reason Poe desired to leave was that his foster father had remarried (O 1:45). Harrison explains that it was Allan’s second marriage that led to Poe’s “insubordination and neglect of duty” culminating in his being “court martialed and expelled from the Academy.”²³

In addition, Poe’s decision to leave may have been fueled by his disappointment at not getting credit for his prior service and earlier coursework; according to Hecker, Poe “believed he could breeze through West Point’s demanding engineering curriculum in only six months.”²⁴ Today’s cadets with college or Advanced Placement credit and/or prior military service likewise start out as lowly plebes (or freshmen); West Point does not encourage or condone shortcuts. Poe’s January 3, 1831, letter reveals his overall frustration.

I have no energy left, nor health, If it was possible, to put up with the fatigues of this place, and the inconveniences which my absolute want of necessaries subject me to, and as I mentioned before it is my intention to resign. For this end it will be necessary that you (as my nominal guardian) enclose me your written permission. It will be useless to refuse me this last request—for I can leave the place without any permission—your refusal would only deprive me of the little pay which is now due as mileage.

From the time of writing this I shall neglect my studies and duties at the institution—if I do not receive your answer in 10 days—I will leave the point without—for otherwise I should subject myself to dismissal. (O 1:61-62)

Thompson states that Poe “intentionally disobeyed orders so as to obtain his release from the academy. These infractions consisted of absence from class, chapel, and roll call, though there is an unsubstantiated tradition that he also appeared in formation naked, wearing only the cross-straps of the uniform.”²⁵

Ostrom notes that John Allan “did not write his permission for Poe’s resignation from West Point; so Poe left the Academy on February 19, 1831. . .having been ordered dismissed by sentence of Court Martial and the approval of the Secretary of War, to take effect March 6, 1831. . . .According to the record of Poe’s trial, Poe’s first neglect of duty was dated January 8. . . .moreover he remained at the Point for five weeks longer than he threatened to stay” (O 1:62); Ostrom cites George Woodberry who declares that says Poe left West Point for New York City with only 24 cents of his own (O 1:64). However, J. Thomas Russell asserts that Poe left West Point with more than the usual amount of money for separation and presumes Poe received subscription money paid by several cadets at \$1.25 apiece for *Poems*.²⁶ The publication disappointed many cadet subscribers because it lacked the comic relief that they had come to expect from Poe. Where Poe went from West Point remains debatable, according to John C. French: “In the three years that followed his dismissal from West Point, Edgar Allan Poe might well have disputed Hawthorne’s claim to be the obscurest man of letters in America. Although he was the author of three published volumes of verse, Poe had made so slight an impression on his times that the most diligent of biographers have had difficulty in learning where and how he spent those years.”²⁷

West Point was to prove critical for Poe’s work. Weiss observes that despite a lack of time for writing at West Point, “It is perhaps ironic that this period greatly contributed to Poe’s poetic development....”²⁸ As Benjamin F. Fisher affirms, “Poe’s military experiences

contributed significantly to. . .[the] early poems.”²⁹ One may recognize in *Poems* not only West Point’s setting in the panoramic Hudson River Valley but also the historic military mystique surrounding the school, the incredibly talented and intelligent students at the Academy, and the inevitable jaundiced perspective so often acquired by cadets but seldom revealed to outsiders out of respect for The Long Gray Line. *Poems* helped establish Poe’s poetic vision and the “Letter” clarified his critical stance.

In “Letter to Mr. _____,” the preface to *Poems*, later reprinted as “Letter to B_____,” Poe establishes his poetic principles, but he also evokes the image of the mountainous region surrounding West Point: “to a few gifted individuals, who kneel around the summit, beholding, face to face, the master spirit who stands upon the pinnacle.” He also declares, “By what trivial circumstances men are often led to assert what they do not really believe,” followed later by “learning has little to do with the imagination—intellect with the passions—or age with poetry.”³⁰ It does not take great imagination to see in these lines an author embittered by his military college experience. “Letter to B_____” is one of Poe’s earliest assertions of his literary beliefs, and Hoffman suggests that those beliefs, in part, were formed by Poe’s military experience: “the very discipline of army life, from close-order drill to the hierarchy of command, reinforced Poe’s conception of the draconian rules he proposed to govern the writing of poetry and fiction.”³¹ Hecker reiterates the importance of the Army for Poe, as shown in “Letter to Mr. B_____”: “Since his first piece of published literary criticism that begins to capture his aesthetic, ‘Letter to Mr. _____’ is sent from West Point, perhaps the address does, after all, betray the origins of his poetic vision as the American army. Since his poetic vision is, at the very least, partially grounded in his military experience, perhaps we, as literary critics, should investigate the connections between Poe’s literary work and the American army more thoughtfully.”³²

“Letter to B ____” has been called by Quinn as “probably the earliest of Poe’s critical prose expressions to be printed.”³³ The text is ripe with the sarcasm that one might expect from a college-aged writer who had been educated at the University of Virginia and West Point; for instance, he says in response to Wordsworth’s “The Pet Lamb,” “Is it sympathy for the sheep you wish to excite? I love a sheep from the bottom of my heart.” Later in the text, he is even less charitable to Samuel Johnson: “Think of all that is airy and fairy-like, and then of all that is hideous and unwieldy; think of his huge bulk, the Elephant!” He concludes his letter with the assertion that he holds “the most sovereign contempt”³⁴ for the metaphysical poets as poets, a phrase of derision which perfectly encapsulates the jaundiced eye with which many of today’s cadets view the world.

Thompson describes Poe’s *Letter* as a work that “satirizes romantic poetry and aesthetics”; Thompson also says that five tales published the year after Poe left West Point were “satiric parodies of popular genres and authors.”³⁵ Poe could turn the sharp edge of his wit on himself, as Richard Wilbur noted in an interview: “One thing I’ve never talked or written about is Poe as a self-mocker, as a parodist of himself. It strikes me that we find that happening very successfully and touchingly in the poem ‘Fairy-Land,’ where he keeps dropping into the matter-of-fact, the prosaic, and almost exploding his poem.”³⁶ Poe’s satiric vein might have been fostered by his stay at the University of Virginia, and it most certainly would have been encouraged at West Point where cynicism and satire in many forms remain supreme today.

The 1831 *Poems* includes not only Poe’s “Letter” and “Fairyland,” but it also featured “Introduction” (“Romance”) and revised versions of “Al Aaraaf” and “Tamerlane,” as well as six previously unpublished poems: “To Helen,” “Israfel,” “Irene” (“The Sleeper”), “The Valley of Unrest” (“The Valley Nis”), “A Paean” (“Leonore”), and “The City in the Sea” (“The Doomed

City”). The stanzas in the “Introduction” flow from the child to the idle boy to “the eternal Condor years”—“O, then the eternal Condor years / So shook the very Heaven on high, / With tumult as they thunder’d by;”—the imagery could suggest the sound of a military attack.³⁷ John Grant, James Lynch, and Ronald Bailey in *West Point: The First 200 Years* cite the 1833 graduate George Cullum, who writes of the deafening noise of artillery drill and its impact on first year cadets: It “affords us not [a] small quantity of amusement. Never being accustomed to hear so many pieces discharged at once so near them they make as much fuss as though they had an arm or two shot off.”³⁸ To “Introduction,” Poe adds,

But *now* my soul hath too much room —
Gone are the glory and the gloom —
The black hath mellow’d into grey,
And all the fires are fading away.³⁹

Several items in these lines suggest West Point imagery, including the perpetual lack of time and the gloom and gray known to cadets during the gloomy “Gray Period” of midwinter.

“To Helen” is, of course, one of Poe’s most frequently anthologized poems. The date when Poe actually wrote the poem is unclear, but Hecker tells us, “the lyric was at least compiled and revised, if not written, while Poe was serving under military discipline. We can thus imagine the speaker in an American military barracks.”⁴⁰ The classical imagery and statue-like phrase certainly evoke West Point monuments, while the phrase, “barks of yore/That gently, o’er a perfume’d sea,” resonates with the view a cadet might see from Trophy Point, a stunning lookout over the Hudson River.⁴¹ The weariness attributed to the wanderer also accurately and perpetually describes cadets. Hecker asserts, “the speaker of ‘To Helen’ clearly identifies himself as a ‘weary way-worn wanderer,’ a fair description of the young poet whose military travels had

covered much of the American eastern seaboard after he left John Allan's guardianship."⁴² Gibson recalled of Poe that "He had a worn, weary, discontented look, not easily forgotten by those who were intimate with him" which links Poe to his own poem.⁴³ Hecker postulates "Further, the martial associations between Helen and the Homeric epics of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* recall military analogues to the poem." Hecker also notes that the window-niche in the poem, "served as a conduit of escape from the military ambitions in which Poe had trapped himself."⁴⁴ The text is further connected to West Point by the fact that the helmet of Minerva (Pallas Athena), the goddess who helped Odysseus, remains one of West Point's emblems; West Point's modern version is very similar to a drawing that Jefferson Davis, Class of 1828, made as a cadet in a required drawing class just two years before Poe's West Point stint.⁴⁵ Furthermore, Carson points out Hervey Allen's assertion that Poe is known to have had "miniature lares and penates" in his possession.⁴⁶

Poe writes in "Israfel" of the place "Where deep thoughts are duty—."⁴⁷ The melancholic desire of the narrator in the final stanza mirrors that desire of many a cadet—the longing to exchange places with anyone, coupled with the burden of duty. Richard Wilbur points to that notion of duty found in the poem: "That stanza about angelic sensibility stresses the idea of duty, and of deep thought or intellect, and the adoration of transcendent beauty."⁴⁸

In Poe's oft-revised "The Sleeper," certain lines reflect West Point geography, as the vapor of the moon slowly dips "Upon the quiet mountain top" and "Into the universal valley" (M 1:187). Later,

The lily lolls upon the wave;
Wrapping the fog about its breast,
The ruin moulders into rest;

Looking like Lethe, see! the lake

A conscious slumber seems to take. (M 1:187)

Again, the imagery of water, fog, and “mouldering” ruins suggests West Point’s setting.

Critics have speculated that “The Valley of Unrest” (“The Valley Nis”) references a Scottish soldier story, but the imagery itself could very well have been influenced by West Point:

Once it smiled a silent dell

Where the people did not dwell;

They had gone unto the wars,

Trusting to the mild-eyed stars,

Nightly, from their azure towers,

To keep watch above the flowers, (M 1:195)

This all happens above “The sad valley’s restlessness” (M 1:195). In his Afterword to *Private Perry and Mister Poe*, Gerard A. McGowan comments on this valley: “there is something out of place in the particulars of this valley’s design. One sees this most clearly in how horror links with joy there, and in how both poetic ‘effects’ seem caused by the force war breathes into the vista.”⁴⁹ The military idea of keeping watch from towers above a sad valley conjures up West Point imagery. Despite the beauty of the setting, the lonesome sounds of trains and boat traffic wail, and a thick fog regularly rolls up from deep within the Hudson River below to the West Point barracks, so thick sometimes that today’s cadets are immersed in it. Because of the gloominess weighing on the place, the January and February months continue to be called “The Gray Period.” Such a setting could well have inspired the tone and movement for “Leonore”:

“Let *no* bell toll, then, lest her soul, amid its hallowed mirth / Should catch the note as it doth float up from the damnéd Earth!” (M 1:337). Indeed, as Cantalupo notes, “most of Poe’s stories are in isolated valleys somewhere away from people or in isolated houses.”⁵⁰

“The Doomed City” (“The City in the Sea”) is perhaps the poem in the 1831 collection most evocative of West Point. The narrator describes “a strange city, all alone / Far down within the dim west —” a place that includes “shrines, and palaces, and towers. . . / Time-eaten towers that tremble not!” The fourth stanza, in particular, evokes West Point’s rocky summit:

Yet tho’ no holy rays come down
On the long night-time of that town,
Light from the lurid, deep sea
Streams up the turrets silently —
Up thrones —up long-forgotten bowers
Of sculptured ivy and stone flowers —
Up domes — up spires — up kingly halls —
Up fanes — up Babylon-like walls —
Up many a melancholy shrine
Whose entablatures intertwine
The mask — the viol — and the vine. (M 1:199-200)

Dwayne Thorpe notes in his interpretation of the poem that “Light behaves just as paradoxically as towers, wind and water—coming from below, not above.”⁵¹ Notably, the Hudson River Valley today sends lights upward from both homes in the valley and boats that navigate the

water, seeming to yield “A city which floats miraculously on the face of the waters.” In winter, the frozen River is nearly solid, which helps explain Thorpe’s point: “...water seems more solid than liquid, and air is supernaturally still, the elements fixed in a deadly rigidity.”⁵² Even the choice of the word “fanes” carries possible military connotations; whereas the accepted meaning would be a temple or church, the Old English meaning would have been flags or banners.⁵³

“Tamerlane” was revised for the 1831 edition; Hecker states that “the poem’s main revision occurred after Poe’s enlisted service and during his cadet career,” and that the poem must be examined from a military perspective: “A close look at Poe’s military career adds another dimension to ‘Tamerlane’ that critics rarely explore, as the poet fills Section V of the poem with martial imagery.”⁵⁴ Hecker further notes that, “The images of ‘red flashing of the light/From clouds’ and ‘deep trumpet thunder’s roar’ figure not only general battle, but also the flash and roar of the artillery pieces with which artificer ‘Perry’ had spent nearly a year of his young life in constant contact and study.”⁵⁴ As a first-year cadet, Poe would also have experienced the roar of military weaponry, as depicted in *West Point: The First 200 Years*:

The plebes did find some aspects of the summer encampment to be quite exhilarating, if also a little startling. “Immediately after guard mounting we had artillery drill,” one wrote to his hometown minister, “we had six large brass field pieces, at first it used to almost deafen me, it would have astonished you I think to see little boys not 5 feet high touching off a large cannon, and performing all the duties necessary to man a piece.”⁵⁵

Hecker points to the eagle imagery of section XIX of “Tamerlane”; those lines also suggest Hudson River Valley geography: “When hope, the eagle that tower’d, could see / No cliff beyond him in the sky.”⁵⁶

Cliffs surround West Point, to the consternation of all who attempt to travel there. According to Keith J. Hamel in the *West Point* publication, visitors to West Point today can still visit a private garden built by Thaddeus Kosciuszko, the Polish military engineer whom George Washington chose to design West Point in March 1778.⁵⁷ However, Kosciuszko’s garden is forty feet below the east-facing cliff side of a current building. In the middle of the cliff, “Kosciuszko discovered a bubbling spring, which he fashioned into a small fountain of spraying jets and cascades,” according to Anthony DiNoto of West Point. Cadets in 1802 repaired the garden, and it became “one of the oldest, continuously maintained gardens in America.”⁵⁸ Later in “Tamerlane,” Kosciuszko’s gardens could be implicated: “Whose pleasant bowers are yet so riven / Above with trelliced rays from Heaven” (M 1:53).

A columned shaft monument erected in honor of Kosciuszko is one of at least three monuments still standing at West Point that existed in Poe’s time; the others are the columned Cadet Monument and the obelisk of Wood’s Monument.⁵⁹ Poe would have seen tangible classical garden settings and statues as he composed and revised his 1831 *Poems*. Their influence may also be seen in his 1846 sketch, “The Domain of Arnheim.” There he describes Ellison’s four-year search for the suggestively phrased “table-land of wonderful fertility and beauty” near a “populous city” (M 3:1277-78). Also hinting at West Point are mathematics, concern with superintendence, and the correction of compositions. All of this seems indicative of West Point, especially since the word “Arnheim” itself is German for “Home of the Eagle,” as Undine points out.⁶⁰

The geography of West Point as a site, sitting high above the Hudson River, clearly helps explain the unusual landscapes Poe depicts in his poems and sketch. Long before Poe's time at the Academy from May 1830 to February 1831, West Point was literally a fortress on a hill. Because of its steep, rocky terrain and Gothic constructions of granite, its cadet nickname is "our rockbound highland home," as referenced by the Current Superintendent Robert L. Caslen in the Winter 2015 *West Point*.⁶¹ That publication points out that the Superintendent's current home would have been less than ten years old while Poe was there, as would have the Commandant's Home.⁶² Additional quarters still standing were extant then, as well, some of them featuring stones taken from The Plain, today's hallowed parade ground that served as a place for mounted cavalry drills or summer training encampment in Poe's day. Near The Plain, Trophy Point offers the "Million Dollar View" of the Hudson River.⁶³

The graceful gardens, the dizzying cliffs, the unrelenting expectations and harsh workload, the hauntingly beautiful Hudson River—West Point's environment undoubtedly left its mark on Poe's work and led Hecker, who himself completed four years of the grueling Academy experience, to assert of Poe: "His service as a military artificer functions as more than a clever metaphor for his poetic vision; it also models the impact the United States Army and the United States Military at West Point had upon his 1831 *Poems*."⁶⁴ Fisher supports Hecker's point that "...Poe's military training as an artificer—that is, one who prepares weaponry, most notably bombs—influenced the 'explosive' qualities" of Poe's work because "The preparation of bombs requires close attention, else one may be victimized by the very weapon in preparation. Just so, Poe's poems evince a precise attention to detail."⁶⁵

More recent calls to examine the military influence on Poe begin to address the notion that Poe's time at West Point did more than direct the topic of a few poems. Hecker, with two

relatives who also attended West Point, understood firsthand the significance of the place on the person; his “Introduction” to *Private Perry and Mister Poe* states that “by not delving more deeply into the character of Poe’s army and the training he received as a soldier, the literary community overlooks the possibility that the young poet’s military experience might contribute to his poetic vision in important ways,” continuing that Poe’s “military experience formed and reinforced key aspects of the aesthetic underlying his poetic vision.” Hecker recognizes the limited number of contributions to scholarship in this area including Quinn’s examination of Poe’s time as an artillerist in locales that ““made a lasting impression upon Poe;” Jeffrey Meyers’s explanation of the “satisfaction of belonging to a group” as one result of Poe’s enlistment; and Silverman’s defense that military service “filled some of Poe’s psychological needs.”⁶⁶ Hoffman observes that “Poe’s early years in the American military” are “a strangely neglected aspect of his life” and that Poe “likely. . .absorbed and internalized certain elements of his military experience.” Hoffman further asserts, “Whatever we can learn of the circumstances of Poe’s life contributes to our understanding of his strange yet universal genius,” pointing to Poe’s military background as “an overlooked chapter in Poe’s life.”⁶⁷ Fisher’s review suggests that “Poe’s military experiences and his incorporation of aspects of them in his writings ranks him with other American authors such as Hemingway and Stein, whose experience of war significantly influenced their artistry.”⁶⁸

The Hudson River Valley’s haunting beauty can also be seen in the artistic creations of the Hudson River School artists and in the short stories of Washington Irving, who lived across the river only thirty miles downstream. The physical beauty of the area surrounding West Point is evident both in Poe’s poetry and letters; for instance, in a letter to John Allan dated November 6, 1830, Poe expresses disappointment that his foster father had recently been in New York (only

fifty miles away) but had chosen not to visit: “I was indeed very much in hopes that the beauty of the river would have tempted yourself and Mr. and Mrs. Jas. Galt to have paid us a visit” (O 1:58). Indeed, Quinn says, “Poe. . .refers to the beauty of the river, and at least while at camp he would have had full opportunity to appreciate his picturesque and romantic surroundings. . . .it must have seemed that the river. . .deliberately halted in its progress in order that the residents of West Point could see it constantly in one of the loveliest of its settings.”⁶⁹ In this lonely, isolating place, Poe experienced the same problems contemporary cadets do, from the jaundiced perspective and the “worn, weary, discontented”⁷⁰ desire to be anywhere else, to the cynicism West Pointers often adopt that remains largely unknown outside West Point.

The isolation of West Point’s locale, in addition to its regimented lifestyle and geographic phenomena, resonate in Poe’s writings—especially in his letters home and in his 1831 *Poems*. As Hoffman succinctly states, “It is typical of Poe to have absorbed all of his experiences, transformed them, and made them contribute to his unremitting vision of life, death, and the idealistic annihilation of the sensory world.”⁷¹ Readers who have had direct contact with West Point understand that it leaves an indelible mark on visitors and cadets, even with today’s sensibilities. Anyone familiar with the Academy would admit that cadets could not attend even briefly without feeling the school’s impact. Poe’s work, as all great authors’ work does, is open, of course, both to multiple interpretations and multiple teaching approaches: “In no other seminars that I ever taught anywhere did students come up with new and valid interpretations of texts as they did with Poe’s. A lot of Poe is still lying there, I think, waiting to be seen in the right way.”⁷² That Poe’s work is also open to being interpreted regarding influences on it—especially the terrain and the experience surrounding West Point cadets—must be acknowledged, particularly for the text published immediately after his departure from the Academy.

Notes

¹ Between the summer of 2009 and May 2016, I had at least one child attending West Point and have become very familiar with its traditions, its grandeur, and even its darker sides. My frequent visits and my close contact with two West Point cadets and their friends there lead me to conclude West Point must have influenced Poe's work.

² Egon Weiss, foreword to *Edgar Allan Poe: The Army Years*, by J. Thomas Russell (West Point, NY: USMA, 1972): vi.

³ William F. Hecker, *Private Perry and Mister Poe, The West Point Poems 1831: A Facsimile Edition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2005), xxxiii-xxxiv.

⁴ Hecker, xxxv, xxxviii.

⁵ Hecker, xl.

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⁷ Hecker, xxx.

⁸ Arthur Hobson Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography* (NY: Appleton-Century, 1941): 169.

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¹⁰ Thomas W. Gibson, "Poe at West Point," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, November 1867, Online at Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore—Bookshelf, <http://www.eapoe.org/papers/misc1851/18671100.htm>, 755-56.

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- ¹⁴ Oelke, Karl E., "Poe at West Point—A Reevaluation." *Poe Studies* 6, no. 1 (June 1973): 1.
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- ²³ Harrison, 85.
- ²⁴ Hecker, xxxiii.
- ²⁵ Thompson, xxiii.
- ²⁶ J. Thomas Russell, *Edgar Allan Poe: The Army Years* (West Point: USMA, 1972): 29.
- ²⁷ John C. French, "Poe and the *Baltimore Saturday Visiter*." *Modern Language Notes* 33, no. 5 (May 1918): 257.

²⁸ Weiss, v.

²⁹ Benjamin Fisher, review of *Private Perry and Mister Poe* by William F. Hecker. *Edgar Allan Poe Review* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 47.

³⁰ Edgar Allan Poe, *Poems*, 2nd ed. (New York: Elam Bliss, 1831), reprinted in William F. Hecker, *Private Perry and Mister Poe*, 15, 17, 21. (See also L 2:5, 6, 7.)

³¹ Hoffman, xiii.

³² Hecker, lxvii.

³³ Quinn, 175.

³⁴ Poe, *Poems*, 26, 28, 29. (See also L 2:9, 10, 11.)

³⁵ Thompson, xxiv, xxv.

³⁶ Richard Wilbur quoted in Richard Wilbur, "Interview with Richard Wilbur (May 2003)," by Barbara Cantalupo. *The Edgar Allan Poe Review* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 77.

³⁷ Poe, *Poems*, 34-35. (See also M 1:157.)

³⁸ John Grant, James Lynch, and Ronald Bailey, *West Point: The First 200 Years* (Guilford, CT: The Globe Pequot Press, 2002), 43.

³⁹ Poe, *Poems*, 35. (See also M 1:165-66.)

⁴⁰ Hecker, lxi.

⁴¹ Poe, *Poems*, 39. (See also M 1:165-66.)

⁴² Hecker, lxi.

⁴³ Gibson, 754.

⁴⁴ Hecker, lxi, lxiii.

⁴⁵ Grant, Lynch, and Bailey, 46.

⁴⁶ Carson, 282.

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⁵⁰ Cantalupo, quoted in "Interview with Richard Wilbur," 82.

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⁶² “Rockbound Highland Homes: Historic Quarters at West Point,” *The West Point Association of Graduates*. *West Point* 5, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 20.

⁶³ DiNoto, 15, 13.

⁶⁴ Hecker, lii.

⁶⁵ Fisher, 47.

⁶⁶ Hecker, xix-xxi.

⁶⁷ Hoffman, xi-xiii, xv.

⁶⁸ Fisher, 48.

⁶⁹ Quinn, 170.

⁷⁰ Gibson, 754.

⁷¹ Hoffman, xiii.

⁷² Wilbur, quoted in “Interview with Richard Wilbur,” 83.